

Mayor Keynes in Punta del Este

Mayor Keynes, dressed in Hawaiian shirt and cargo shorts, exalted at the ocean breeze as the sun rose over the South Atlantic. The morning air of Punta del Este smelled of salt spray with a faint odor of pines. He had just completed his morning constitutional, a walking tour of the small peninsula that the people of Uruguay consider the jewel of their country. Originally founded as an obscure fishing village on a spit of sand at the point where the mouth of the Rio de la Plata meets the Atlantic, Punta del Este was seized upon in the 1940s by developers as the site for a luxury resort because of its location midway between Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro. It had evolved as the playground of Latin American aristocracy, its casino, five star hotels and nightclubs playing host to notables no less eminent than Juan and Eva Peron, the presidents and industrialists of Argentina and Brazil, performing artists and sports stars of South America and Europe, as well as various other monied elements drawn by Uruguay's discreet banking culture and lax enforcement of extradition agreements concerning fiduciary irregularities. In short, it was the ideal location for a mayor of New York currently under indictment.

The mayor had long ago purchased a duplex in the luxurious Malecón Condominiums overlooking the Playa Mansa beach in anticipation of just such an eventuality, and that is where he had retired to following his inculpation by New York's Republican U.S. Attorney following revelations of kickbacks relating to the rezoning of Coney Island. Mayor Keynes had no doubt that he would inevitably get the indictments thrown out. New York was a Democratic city, and he had had a stranglehold on judicial appointments to the federal bench in the Southern District for a considerable number of years. But he was damned if he would give his political enemies the satisfaction of seeing him led into the courthouse in handcuffs, the digital images of which would survive for the duration of the Republic. No, he would take a much-deserved vacation and leave his attorneys to sort out the legalities of the situation.

He had a private jet awaiting him on a little-used runway at Kennedy Airport. On his way to the airport, he instructed the driver to change direction and go by way of the Belt Parkway through South Brooklyn. Once there he again confounded his security detail, ordering them to take him to Brighton Beach, where he exited his limo and walked out onto the sand. It was a clear, moonlit night. He walked in his Saville Row suit and hand-crafted brogues to the water's edge, turned his back to the bay, and gloated with triumphal satisfaction on the result of his handiwork, a magnificent, glittering skyline rivaling that of Miami Beach or even Manhattan. What had formerly been a shabby, inconsequential quarter of Brooklyn, a squat, nondescript neighborhood of squalid apartment blocks and ramshackle carnival attractions fit only for the deracinated masses of immigrants, he had transformed into a glittering utopia of avant-garde architecture and glamour bursting at the seams with the cream of the world's elite who battled each other tooth and nail for an apartment overlooking Breezy Point (he had a development plan in mind for that as well) and Sandy Hook.

Mayor Keynes understood that the process had been brutal, neighborhood cohesion built up over the course of generations having been destroyed. Helpless people had been uprooted and made to suffer. But if New York was to survive, it was only by continued growth and development. Where would Paris be today if not for the vision and ruthlessness of Baron Haussmann? Closer to home, Robert Moses had been viciously excoriated for his remodeling projects of the twentieth century, but ultimately been proven right.

Mayor Keynes was unmarried and childless. New York was his only family, and he intended to leave it grander and richer than he had found it, the same as one would do for one's own children. He saw the city

as an organic entity: cells die and cells are born – the difference being that the physical body has only a finite expectancy of life whereas New York was meant to live forever.

Had he personally profited? Of course he had! The concept of the selfless public servant working for the betterment of the community while himself refusing to touch filthy lucre was a naïve one at best. Put plainly, it was pure imbecility. Mayor Keynes had fought himself up from the streets of Hell's Kitchen, where his mother ran a saloon on Tenth Avenue. He had been a Golden Gloves boxing champion as a teenager, won a full scholarship to Yale and studied at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. If he had gone into government, as opposed to private enterprise, was that any different than the nobility of Europe who disdained commerce for careers in the military, government or the clergy? They certainly never entertained the notion of living modestly like a humble dormouse, and neither did he. From the start, he had modeled himself as a "novus homo" in the tradition of the Roman Empire, an eminence of public administration who became rich working for the benefit of the collective.

Starting his political career in the office of the City Controller, he had become notable for his integrity, though he nevertheless developed close ties to the banking community and used what he heard to occasionally make a small investment for himself. As he rose through the city hierarchy, so did the volume of his placements and nobody thought the worse of him for it.

Though naturally gregarious, erudite in fact, he kept his own counsel. And he never forgot the lessons he had learned as a boxer. Nobody advances in New York without making enemies, or at least adversaries, and the mayor kept his stomach tight to withstand hard body blows. Though he tried to stay outside the reach of opponents and keep them off-balance with jabs in their faces (rhetorically speaking, of course), he was never hesitant to step inside and exchange shots at close range, to keep punching with both hands until he had driven them onto the ropes, exhausted and reeling from the inundation of blows, whereupon he would shower them with head shots until they crumpled. People of lesser ability than he, and that included everybody, soon learned to stay clear of him though it built him indomitable blocs of enemies that waited and seethed in frustration as he prospered, until the zoning scandal finally erupted.

The scandal broke when the New York Long Term Credit Bank discovered that a Brooklyn machine tool manufacturer, Simon Orlovsky, had borrowed hundreds of millions of dollars secured by forged export orders that did not exist, and that Orlovsky had invested the money to finance the construction of luxury condominium developments in Coney Island. When Federal and state prosecutors became involved, Orlovsky quickly flipped, supplying details of dummy corporations controlled by The Sea Breeze Gang and wearing a wire to record discussions involving payoffs to "consultants" in return for rezoning resolutions passed by the city council. The payments were traced to Swiss bank accounts which the compliant Swiss banking authority revealed to be controlled by shell corporations operated out of the Channel Islands and Grand Cayman Island. And so on and so forth until, when all the skins of the financial onion had finally been laboriously peeled away, the trail finally led to a handful of Tampa millionaires with CIA connections who had contributed heavily to Mayor Keynes' (among others') election campaigns and who owned vacation properties to which the mayor held lifetime leases.

These revelations were enough to whet the appetite of the Republican U.S. Attorney, ominously (for anybody who had ever served time in Massachusetts) named Shirley Needham. She subpoenaed all Mayor Keynes' banking records and discovered links with other "consultancies" suspected of arranging for various exclusive Manhattan properties to be undervalued for tax purposes in return for cash payoffs.

No smoking gun was ever discovered with the mayor's fingerprints on it, and as the flood of nebulous accusations and innuendo cascaded daily in the newspaper and media reports, he ceaselessly insisted that he was the victim of a right-wing smear job fuelled by partisan politics. But Shirley Needham, who kept a bust of Rudy Giuliani in her office, had been able to assemble a construct of interlocking interests illustrated by flow charts and diagrams that convinced the sitting grand jury to indict him on forty-two counts of conspiracy and racketeering.

In the first interview granted by the mayor from his "vacation retreat" in Uruguay, he stated with jocularity, "Forty-Two is my lucky number. These things happen from time to time in New York politics." He continued. "Mayors are often sitting targets for competing political interests. William Jay Garner was shot in the neck by a disgruntled public employee, and he eventually died from the wound. Let them say what they like, as long as they keep their pistols in their pockets."

Mayor Keynes breathed deeply the robust salt air of the South Atlantic . To witness the inspirational rising of the sun and the multifarious beauties of nature at dawn was his tonic. He often wished that he had been inspired by the muse to write poetry like so many of his Roman forebears (as a person of English extraction, he counted the ancient Romans as part of his ancestral heritage). Oh, the joy to compose as Cicero had:

Meanwhile the paths which you from earliest days did seek,
Yes, and when Consul too, as mood and virtue called,
These hold, and foster still your fame and good men's praise

His heart quickened. Oh boy, that was poetry! That was life, to dine at the banquet table in the company of Julius Caesar, Pompey and Crassus, discussing Scipio's African campaigns and the politics of the Roman senate. Life today, with its predigested video life and its sound bites, was barely tolerable.

Mayor Keynes was nevertheless clever enough to know that not having been visited by Calliope, the goddess of poetry and, lacking the artistic component, he was condemned to at best a second-rate existence. Still, he accepted his limitations as he saw them and persevered.

He breakfasted on croissants and strong coffee at an outdoor café facing the boat basin and walked back to his apartment. One room of the apartment had been remodeled into a situation room with T.V. monitors and an elaborate computer set-up. He switched on three monitors to the American all-news channels and let them drone on while he perused the web sites of the New York papers. The hard copies would be FedEx-ed down to him, but that would be late in the day, too late to respond, so he gleaned what he could from what was available on the internet. Then he speed-dialed his press secretary at City Hall.

The mayor had found it useful to have for his spokesman a person of color. The man he chose for this post, a black man named Julius Knight, was a retired policeman who had only achieved his B.A. at age 39. Julius Knight was hard-bitten as they come, having served in the city's most notorious precincts, but he had kept a vigorous, youthful image by virtue of an exacting fitness regimen, and would not have been out of place modeling shirtless and in tights in the color pages of Muscle and Fitness Magazine. After retiring from the force, he had become active in community affairs in the East Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn, where he worked as advance man for a city counselor nowhere near as qualified as he. It was there that he came to the attention of the mayor, who he met at a community function. What endeared him to Mayor Keynes was

that as a youth, Julius Knight had been Golden Gloves. The mayor loved boxers.

Julius Knight presented a stern, authoritative image of rectitude before the television cameras, but in private he was a helpful, eager subordinate. The mayor loved him and repeatedly promised him all future assistance in the furtherance of Knight's political career (Julius Knight took these promises with a grain of salt, being enough of a New Yorker to understand the true value of a boss' promise).

When Knight's image appeared on the videophone, Mayor Keynes, dispensing with niceties, plunged into the business at hand. "We have to respond to these Community Board 3 complaints about the emissions from the emergency generators at the 13th Street Pump Station."

"I agree."

"You'll call a press conference and emphasize the fact that water purity is in the interest of all New Yorkers, and that the short-term loss of air quality in Alphabet City is an unavoidable by-product of the current energy crisis. Make sure you throw in something about the fowling of city waters from the pollution being dumped into the Hudson River by upstate manufacturers."

"Gotcha."

"In the meantime, call Dan Bernstein at the Department of Environmental Protection and find out where we stand in terms of installing more powerful filters on the emergency generators."

"O.K."

"That rabbi in Brooklyn who got indicted – did you find out if he contributed any money to our last campaign?"

"As far as I know, his contribution was in the neighborhood of \$2,000."

"Well, when you find out the exact amount return the contribution to him."

"Issue a press release deplored the design of the Regents Math exam, saying it places an unfair burden on underprivileged city students."

Julius Knight asked, "Have you seen the exam?"

"We'll go back to it later. Remember, there's an election coming up."

"O.K."

"What's the latest on that officer who was shot in Staten Island ?"

"He's in intensive care."

"Who visited him?"

"The Deputy Police Commissioner."

"You feel like taking a ride over there?"

"If you think I should, sure whynot?"

"Don't forget to bring flowers."

"The guy already got enough flowers to start his own export business."

"That's O.K., think of something else. Don't show up emptyhanded. Make sure you have something inspirational to say to the press."

"The only thing the press wants to hear is when you're coming back."

"You can remind them that this is my first extended vacation since I assumed office. Tell them that I'm having a conference with the Uruguayan justice minister to explore international law enforcement cooperation."

Julius Knight smiled, "They should get a good laugh out of that."

"He who laughs last et-cetera. Have you spoken with my attorneys?"

"I spoke to Jake Pretzel. They're drawing up a motion for the Court of Appeals to have the indictments thrown out on the grounds that they are 'offensive to your rights of due process on the grounds of the

dangerous expedient of commencing an investigation based on media reports.”

The mayor exploded. “What kind of horseshit is that?! I’m not paying them hundreds of thousands of dollars to bury me by filing frivolous motions. Tell them to file that motion in the garbage and come up with a more comprehensive strategy, something with a foundation in case law. No, I’ll tell them myself.”

“Pretzel’s in Chicago today, and Hamburger and Frankfurter are in court trying a counterfeiting case.”

“Counterfeiting of what?”

“Currency.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Mayor Keynes laughed out loud. By this time the American dollar had been loaded up with so many security measures, 3-D halographs of the presidents, bars and water marks that showed when the bill was held up to the light, even embedded computer chips, that only the biggest donkey would attempt to knock it off. “Who is this genius?” he guffawed.

“A guy named Morrie Belo. They call him Pops.”

“I know Pops,” said the mayor. “He’s in the rag trade. He’s already loaded.”

“Show me a New Yorker who thinks he’s got enough money, and I’ll show you an anti-social element,” deadpanned Julius Knight. “Anyway, I don’t think they got him for participating in the actual operation. More like being an accessory before the fact, for the financing of it. The actual counterfeitors are Italian wiseguys from Bay Ridge.”

“You think they got a case against Pops?” asked the mayor.

“If I was privy to that kind of intelligence, I might be better placed to tell you the true status of your case. My sources just don’t extend that far.”

“Well, I hope for Pops’ sake that it’s not as bad as you say. Counterfeiting, whew!”

